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AUTHOR Meyer, John; Stafford, Jeff
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ABSTRACT

A group leadership exercise that incorporates the elements of leadership and other aspects of interaction within small groups can be useful in a basic communication course. The exercise is designed around three basic leadership styles: laissez-faire, democratic, and authoritarian. The exercise is conducted in the following way: (1) the class divides into groups of five to seven persons; (2) each group selects a leader in any manner it chooses; (3) each student leader is assigned a leadership style so that all three styles are evenly represented; (4) student leaders are instructed about each leadership style; (5) leaders return to the groups and oversee the group as it decides in what order 10 steps should be taken when developing a new project for a corporation; and (6) for future discussion the instructor notes the varying types of interactions occurring within the groups. The exercise may take from 20 minutes to the entire class session, depending on the depth of discussion desired. Groups with different styles of leadership may have different experiences and results, as may each class participating in the exercise. These differences can be discussed with the class. The group leadership exercise allows for a diversity of paths available for processing. (A handout for group members is attached.) (RS)

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A GROUP LEADERSHIP EXERCISE

John Meyer

University of Southern Mississippi

Jeff Stafford

Eastern Washington University

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CONTACT: John Meyer
Speech Communication Dept.
Box 5131
University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-5131
(601) 266-4280
BITNET: JMEYER@USMCP6

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A GROUP LEADERSHIP EXERCISE

INTRODUCTION

In most basic communication courses, discussion of small groups almost inevitably leads to, includes or is preceded by questions of leadership. Who becomes the leader and why one person emerges have long aroused curiosity among scholars, and those enrolled in an undergraduate communication course are no exception. It is very easy for a discussion of small-group behavior to diverge into a discussion of leadership. Yet there are more dynamics involved in the study of small-group behavior than that of leadership. Therefore, it is not desireable to subsume a small group curriculum unit into what actually becomes a "leadership unit." An exercise which incorporates the elements of both leadership and other aspects of interaction within small groups would be beneficial for inclusion in a basic communication course.

This proposed exercise would fit in well as an introduction to the small group unit, as a fitting demonstration of concepts during the course of the unit, and as a "real-life" chance to observe and practice concepts already learned toward completion of the unit. The group leadership exercise should be done <u>before</u> a discussion of leadership styles, as a complete knowledge of such styles before the

exercise might render it less effective as an instructional technique. Since the exercise differentiates between leadership styles, if the students know what to expect from their leader before the exercise has even begun, role-playing may be a more pervasive part of the experience than group problem-solving. Such a situation would make the distinctions too transparent for the potential results of differing leadership styles to be clearly demonstrated. Thus, a caveat must be issued in the sense that the exercise should precede a discussion of leadership styles, rather than immediately follow one. Beyond making adjustments in the positioning of the leadership discussion within the unit, however, the exercise can be placed quite flexibly within the small-group unit of a communication course curriculum.

This exercise also relates to small-group problem-solving. Not only are there variations in group leadership involved, but each group is actually given a problem to solve relating to new projects within organizations, requiring it to make several decisions. As a result, the group not only learns from the process but from the content of the exercise as well. Each group is also made up of divergent individuals in varying situations, both of which impinge on the effectiveness of leadership styles and group processes. This arrangement further enhances the usefulness of the exercise, since planning for a new program in an organizational setting is a quite common communicational experience. The groups' task is to decide in what order ten steps should be taken when developing a new project for a corporation (see Appendix A). The steps were adapted from a small group exercise involving a greater number of steps. Group

processes in deciding which steps to take first may be experienced by the students during the exercise and discussed by the class afterward.

An early conception of leadership styles broke them down into three basic kinds: laissez-faire, democratic, and authoritarian (White and Lippitt, 1960). They have since become a common focus of research. In a sense, the class is conducting an "experiment" testing the effectiveness of each style. Yet the influence of other factors of leadership may affect the result of each group regardless of which of White and Lippett's styles the group encounters. For example, Fiedler's model distinguishes between strongly task-oriented and strongly person-oriented leaders (Fiedler, 1967). These might also be enacted or observed in this exercise. The basic idea is to introduce students to the varying effects of leadership styles, based upon an introductory theory of leadership. This exercise is designed around White and Lippett's styles, although it could, of course, be adapted to suit a different basic leadership theory.

Laissez-faire leaders generally let the group go its own way, taking a minimal role in setting or reaching goals. Initiative is left to group members. The leader gives up what power he/she has, and the group seems more like a collection of equal individuals (Adler and Rodman, 1985). This group is expected to find itself slowed down by chaos and uncertainty, lacking a group orientation. Some studies have backed up this expectation (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977).

Authoritarian or autocratic leaders try to dominate the group,

and always try to get the group to do things their way. Many leaders are quite effective at doing this. They may use legitimate, coercive, or reward forms of power to maintain control. Initially, this kind of leadership was expected to be quite efficient. Studies have borne out this expectation, but have also found a decided lack of morale in autocratic-led groups (White and Lippett, 1960).

Democratic leaders work together with group members to set objectives and determine policy. Emphasis is placed upon airing all differing views of a subject, and the group will usually follow the views of the majority. The democratic leader is actively involved in "keeping the group on track" and leading the discussions. Democratic leadership has been found to be much more efficient and group-oriented than the laissez-faire method (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977). Group morale is also enhanced under this type of leadership (White and Lippett, 1960).

PROCEDURE

The exercise is conducted in the following way:

1. The class is divided into groups of five to seven persons. To prevent everyone joining groups with their closest acquaintances in the class, having the students number off and thus asssign themselves to more random groups is effective. Some class members may be assigned to an observer role or the instructor alone may take that role.

2. Each group may select a leader in any manner it chooses. Here already is a group task which can later be discussed and analyzed.

3. The instructor or session leader then has a conference with the student leaders outside of the classroom. Each student leader is assigned a different leadership style. It is at this point that some role playing will enter in to the exercise. Some students may be more comfortable with one style of leadership than another. (Generally, there seems to be a decided preference for the "laid-back" style of laissez-faire leaders!) For the best demonstration, all three styles should be represented as evenly as possible. Generally, volunteers and instructor designations can be easily combined to do this. The type of leader each student is to be may be assigned randomly, but allowing for volunteers gives students the opportunity to enact the leadership style they feel they can "play" the best. The students, after all, will have to play the part!

4. Then instructions are given to the student leaders about each leadership style.

- Laissez-faire leaders should be told to be fairly passive, sit back, and talk only a little in spite of the tendency of their group to look to them for leadership. They may even encounter group frustration because of this. These leaders may contribute to the discussion, but should leave decisions to the other group members, remaining noncommital themselves.

- Authoritarian leaders should continually assert their own opinions and insist on their own views being adopted by the group, regardless of any conflicts which may arise. These leaders also should dominate the discussion at all times.

- Democratic leaders need to place an emphasis on allowing all group members input on each issue, while still leading the

discussion. The group should also attempt to come to a consensus on all possible decisions, generally by following the view of the majority.

5. After receiving these instructions, leaders return to their waiting groups, who are told that their leaders "have received information that will help with the exercise (or project)." Papers describing the project are then distributed (see Appendix A), the task explained, and the groups set to work.

6. The instructor or session leader should note the varying types of interaction occurring within the groups for future discussion, and also the order of the groups' times of completion of the task.

PROCESSING

Processing this exercise may take anywhere from 20 minutes to an entire class session, depending on the depth of discussion desired. The groups may be asked to give feedback to the class about their feelings and experiences, both from leaders and group members. Students may also return to their groups and discuss their actions in the light of new information given them about leadership styles and group processes during the class discussion.

Different behaviors may be noted for different groups. Authoritarian leaders may encounter serious conflicts with members over the project, therefore finishing later, or find that group members easily yield to the leader's decisions, making for a quick finish. It has been found that authoritarian groups may finish faster, especially under stress (Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum, 1971). A

communication class may not be a particularly stressful situation, howvever. Perhaps the exercise creates the opposite effect: group members feel a class exercise is not worth the effort of fighting for their own opinions.

The laissez-faire groups will be initially confused and frustrated as their leader fails to take an active role. Depending upon how long confusion and lack of initiative slow the group down, these groups can be among the first or last to finish. New leaders may emerge in these groups, or decisions made relatively quickly by consensus, thereby speeding these groups up.

Democratic groups are expected to finish last, due to the amount of time it takes to discuss fully and vote on all decisions. Yet group members also feel more involved in the group's activity, and are generally more satisfied with their own and their group's work than members of laissez-faire or autocratic groups. The results of their work may also be of higher quality (White and Lippett, 1960).

Each class participating in the exercise may have different experiences and results. Possible reasons for these results can be discussed. Situational factors involving both individual group members and surrounding context have been found to influence the effectiveness of each leadership style (Rosenbaum and Rosenbaum, 1971). Also, the methods used by leaders and group members for coming to decisions, especially in the democratic and laissez-faire groups, should be brought out. The results of the groups'task may also be focused upon and related to organizational communication. Which of the new project steps provoked the most discussion or

controversy among group members? Each group's task order could be compared and assessed for potential effectiveness. This may, in turn, lead to a discussion of how a group or organization may approach decisions to be made, especially about the process of beginning a new project.

Clearly, this exercise allows for a diversity of paths available for processing. Emphasis may be placed on the effects of the various leadership styles, the ways by which groups come to decisions, or the reasons for those decisions themselves. All three aspects of the group's activities during the exercise are relevant or important in an undergraduate communication course. The Group Leadership Exercise can facilitate discussion of small group behavior in any communication course. It is to be hoped that it will be tried--and molded and modified--in the future.

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APPENDIX A: GROUP LEADERSHIP EXERCISE HANDOUT

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SMALL GROUP EXERCISE

Your group has been assigned to develop a new project for the corporation you work for. The purpose of the project has not yet been specified, but your group is meeting to decide how to put the project together when you do find out what it entails.

GROUP PURPOSE: Arrange the following in the order in which each action will be performed.

A. Find qualified people to fill positions.

B. Identify and analyze the various job tasks necessary to implement the project.

C. Develop strategies and priorities for the execution of the project.

D. Develop possible alternative courses of action.

E. Assign responsibility, accountability, and authority.

F. Set project objectives (desired results).

G. Establish qualifications for new positions.

H. Determine the allocation of resources (budget, facilities, etc.).

I. Define the scope of relationships, responsibilities, and authority of new positions.

J. Decide on the basic course of action.

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